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When Exhaustion Drives Distance: The Role of Turnover Intentions and Surface Acting in Workplace Bonds

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ABSTRACT

Emotional exhaustion is inherently tied to the occupation of flight attendants. This often leads to their turnover which incurs significant cost related to their rehiring and training. Existing literature extensively investigates the causes of flight attendants' turnover; however, it has not thoroughly explored how their workplace exchange relationships unfold during the critical period between their decision to leave and their eventual departure from the company. This study addresses this gap by leveraging social exchange and resource conservation theories. Data was collected from 200 flight attendants employed across five airlines registered in Pakistan. Benefiting from Smart PLS 4.0, confirmatory factor analysis, reliability, validity, and predictive relevance were established prior to conducting the mediation and moderation analyses. The results indicate a significant inclination (64%) among emotionally exhausted flight attendants to consider leaving their jobs, with surface acting intensifying this effect even further (71%). Consequently, their contributions to Team Member Exchange (TMX) and Leader Member Exchange (LMX) were found to decrease sharply by 36% and 41% respectively. These findings provide critical insights for flight services managers in the airline industry, underscoring the need to closely monitor exchange relationships among flight attendants and address declines in LMX and TMX. While turnover intentions may not always be overtly expressed, this research provides the empirical evidence suggesting that the observable decline in TMX and LMX can act as early warning signs. Recognizing and addressing these declines in a timely manner could enable these managers to proactively intervene, mitigate these potential challenges, and possibly prevent employee turnover, thereby fostering a more sustainable workforce.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the Airline Deregulation Act, airlines throughout the world have enjoyed the benefits of the free economic environment, which eventually led to more-intense cost and quality competitiveness. The growing competition in airline industry, driven by deregulation and the rise of low-cost carriers, has led to significant changes (Williams, 2017). In this competitive landscape, frontline employees are pivotal in shaping customers' perceptions of an airline's service quality (Etemad-Sajadi et al., 2016; Law et al., 2022). Among these frontline employees, flight attendants are particularly important, as they interact with passengers for the longest duration (Q. Chen et al., 2023; Gibbs et al., 2017). However, the demands placed on them have intensified (C.-F. Chen & Chen, 2014; Mansour & Faisal Azeem, 2024), leading to deteriorating working conditions.

Also, flight attendants are often required to manage their emotions to create a publicly observable display (Lee et al., 2015). They usually are bound to present organizationally desired emotions during service interactions, such as smiling and friendliness, to elicit positive customer responses (Choi et al., 2020). However, service providers are not invariably predisposed to display positive emotions and often resort to "deep" or "surface" acting to generate affective displays (Hochschild, 2003). Surface acting refers to the practice wherein employees fake the necessary emotional expressions, whereas deep acting involves altering one's inner feelings to align with the required emotions (Hochschild Arlie, 1983). While empirical results may vary in their consensus regarding the relative effects of surface and deep acting on employees (Hsieh et al., 2012), in their meta-analysis of 95 independent studies, Hülsheger and Schewe (2011) concluded that surface acting has a more pronounced negative impact on employee well-being compared to deep acting. This underscores the significance of integrating "surface acting" within scholarly discourse pertaining to occupational stress. Moreover, surface acting involves employees masking their true feelings, effectively presenting emotions they do not truly feel (Hochschild Arlie, 1983). This act of 'faking emotions exacerbates the negative effects of 'emotional labor' (Yoo & Arnold, 2015a). Regardless of this known impairment, questions like "how can I get my employees to treat customers as valued clients or to at least convincingly act like they care about the customers?'' are common among service managers (Yoo & Arnold, 2015b). In fact, "which organizational outcomes are to be expected due to incompatibility of employee's natural emotions with the organizational expectations?," is still the question of interest for researchers (Güler et al., 2023). This further highlights the study's significance.

While this emotional labor is a common challenge across service professionals (Bilal et al., 2016), the specific combination of emotional demands with irregular work shifts and a high-pressure environment is particularly distinctive to the role of flight attendants (Hu et al., 2023). Consequently, turnover among flight attendants is high (K.-H. Cho & Ko, 2010), leading to a continual depletion of highly qualified human resources within the airline industry. Turnover typically involves employees either leaving their current positions or developing the intention to depart from their roles (Peltokorpi et al., 2023). This intention is a perceptual variable and typically considered to be a proxy-predictor of actual turnover (Fulmore et al., 2023). The high turnover rate not only affects the airlines' operational efficiency but also undermines their ability to maintain a consistent level of service quality (Claudia & Christo, 2023), further highlighting the critical role of flight attendants in the industry's overall success.

Keeping in mind the significance discussed above, researchers have extensively investigated the causes of flight attendants' turnover (C.-F. Chen & Chen, 2012; Q. Chen et al., 2023). However, the impact of turnover intentions on workplace relationships has been overlooked. These social relations among flight attendants can be categorized into two key constructs. First is the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX), which describes vertical relationship between flight attendants and their purser (Graen & Scandura, 1987). The second construct is Team-Member Exchange (TMX), that focuses on the horizontal relationships between flight attendants and their peers (Settoon et al., 1996). Within inflight service setting and align with the study objectives, a 'purser' presumes the role of a leader

while ‘flight attendants are stated as team members. Here, although TMX and LMX's effects on organizational outcomes such as employee turnover have been well-studied (Lai et al., 2019), but empirical evidence to prove the reverse causality appears to be missing. This indicates a gap in understanding the dynamics of employees’ exchange relationships during their remaining time at the company. Addressing this gap, the study applies Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) and Conservation of Resources Theory (COR) (Hobfoll & Freedy, 1993) to seek answers to the following: First, how does emotional exhaustion, in the context of surface acting, lead to flight attendants’ turnover intentions? Second, how do these turnover intentions deteriorate LMX and TMX? Third, how do turnover intentions mediate the negative effects of emotional exhaustion on vertical and horizontal social exchange relationships in flight?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pertinent in the hospitality industry, emotional exhaustion significantly influences employees' decisions to either stay with or leave organizations (Y.-N. Cho et al., 2017; E. S.-T. Wang, 2014). This issue is particularly pronounced among flight attendants, whose roles are both emotionally and physically demanding (Bergman & Gillberg, 2015), thereby exacerbating turnover intentions when emotional stressors are not adequately managed. It is a role highlighted as emblematic of emotional labor (Hochschild Arlie, 1983). However, flight attendants' responsibilities extend beyond typical front-line service tasks to include ensuring cabin safety and delivering on-board customer service (Santin & Kelly, 2015). From a conservation of resources perspective, emotional exhaustion can be seen as a depletion of critical personal resources. This depletion often necessitates coping strategies that may include withdrawal behaviors, such as turnover intentions, as employees seek to conserve remaining resources (N. P. Podsakoff et al., 2007). Despite the critical role of flight attendants in maintaining safety (Ford et al., 2013) and delivering service (Ahmad, 2023), as well as the theoretical relevance of the Conservation of Resources theory in this milieu, empirical research on the specific relationship between emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions within flight attendants’ occupation remains scarce. Hence the following hypothesis is proposed:

***H_1*:** Flight attendants’ emotional exhaustion significantly escalates their turnover intentions.

Given the importance of retaining experienced flight attendants, researchers have primarily focused on exploring the myriad causes of their turnover (C.-F. Chen, 2006; Q. Chen et al., 2023; Young & James, 2001). However, there remains a paucity of research exploring the exchange relationships of these employees during the remainder of their time within the organization after they have decided to leave (Klotz & Bolino, 2016). To close this void, social exchange theory offers the conceptual foundation. The central focus of the theory revolves around the formation of workplace relationships among employees (Cropanzano et al., 2003). From this perspective, H2 and H3 were proposed as high turnover intentions signal a withdrawal from the company which further reduced flight attendants’ motivation to participate in social exchange relations with their pursers and peers (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

***H_2*:** Flight attendants with high turnover intentions have poor exchange relationship with their pursers.

***H_3*:** Flight attendants with high turnover intentions have poor exchange relationship with their peers.

To further develop the model theorized in Figure 1, study combined COR and SET. This provides a robust framework to understand the mediating role of flight attendants' turnover intentions between their emotional exhaustion and quality of social exchange relationships. As previously discussed, emotional exhaustion depletes flight attendants' resources (Schiffinger & Braun, 2020). This resource depletion creates a foundation for increased turnover intentions as individuals seek to escape an environment that continuously drains their resources without adequate replenishment. These intentions signal a disengagement from the social exchange processes (Ku et al., 2014). These employees are less inclined to invest in the mutual give-and-take required to maintain high-quality TMX and LMX relationships (Dasgupta, 2024). Hence, the study hypothesized the following:

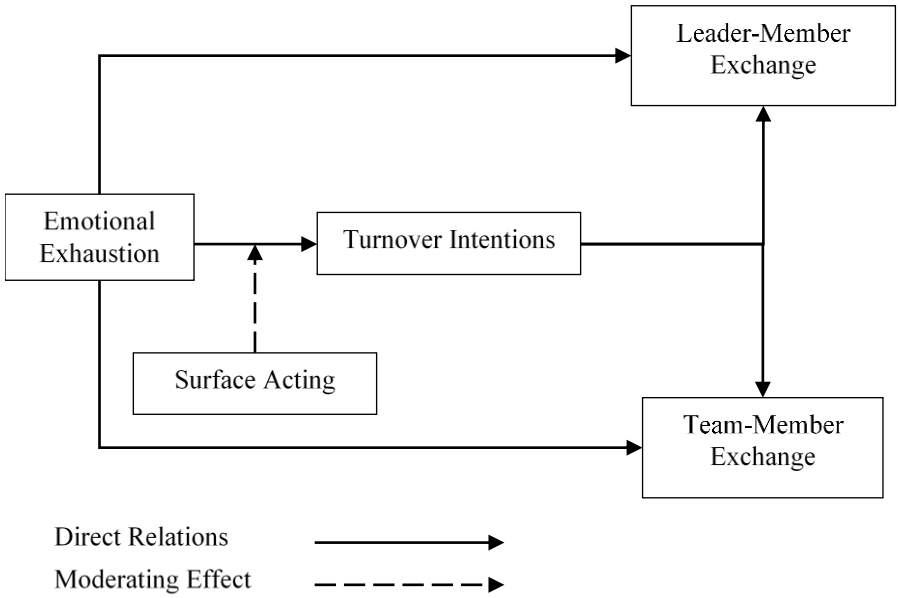
***H_4*:** Turnover intentions significantly mediate the adverse impact of employee emotional exhaustion on TMX.

***H_5*:** Turnover intentions significantly mediate the adverse impact of employee emotional exhaustion on LMX.

Service employees, such as flight attendants, are often required to display organizationally desired emotions, such as smiling and conveying friendliness, while suppressing others, such as anger (Groth et al., 2009). However, these employees are not invariably predisposed to display positive emotions and frequently resort to 'surface acting' to generate affective displays (Hochschild, 2003). Surface acting refers to the practice wherein employees fake the necessary emotional expressions. A meta-analysis of 95 independent studies by Hülsheger and Schewe (2011) concluded that surface acting has a negative impact on employee well-being. Subsequent studies have empirically tested the link between surface acting and emotional exhaustion among employees (Uy et al., 2016; A. Wang et al., 2023; Yagil & Medler-Liraz, 2017). This underscores the significance of integrating 'surface acting' within scholarly discourse on occupational stress. Moreover, employees who engage in surface acting are more susceptible to experiencing emotional dissonance, the tension felt when expressions and feelings diverge (Chuaychoo & Tunjoy, 2022). This emotional dissonance exacerbates emotional exhaustion (Peng et al., 2010; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998).

Foundational concepts of COR theory support that surface acting put a significant toll on personal resources (Hobfoll & Freedy, 2017). Because of its incessant regulatory demands, surface acting adds up to the emotional exhaustion of frontline service employees (Walsh et al., 2016). In this context, flight attendants, who are often engage in surface acting, experience higher levels of emotional exhaustion (Lee et al., 2015). As a result, they seek to escape this emotional labor by quitting. Given the airline industry's ongoing challenges in retaining flight attendants, it is crucial to understand the role of surface acting in this dynamic which led to the following hypothesis:

***H_6*:** Surface acting (SAC) significantly moderates the relationship between flight attendants' EEX and their TOI in a way that with the increase in SAC, the impact of EEX on TOI increases.



Source: Author

Figure 1: Conceptual Model

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Quantitative analysis of the research hypotheses was conducted using survey data collected via convenience and snowball sampling methods. Statistical analyses were performed with Microsoft Excel, SPSS 22, and SmartPLS 4.

Sampling and Data Collection

Flight attendants from five registered airlines in Pakistan i.e., Pakistan International Airlines, Airblue, Serene Air, AirSial, and Fly Jinnah participated in this study. Convenience sampling was used due to its reliance on participants' accessibility and willingness (Clark et al., 1998). This non-probability technique is widely employed in human psychology research (Hultsch et al., 2002) and in studies particularly related to flight attendants' job roles (Hong et al., 2023). Additionally, to leverage respondents' social network and to address logistical challenges attributed to the respondents' diverse duty schedules, snowball sampling was also used (Heckathorn, 1997).

Out of 208 filled questionnaires, 200 valid responses were used in the analysis. The sample comprised 80% females and 20% males, reflecting the gender distribution typical in this occupation (Węziak-Białowolska et al., 2020). To ensure reliability, participants had at least one year of experience with the same airline, allowing adequate time for the development of workplace exchange relationships (C.-F. Chen & Kao, 2012).

Scales and Measurement Model

Leader-Member Exchange was measured using the seven-item LMX-7 scale (Graen & Scandura, 1987) with 'leader' replaced by 'purser' to align it with the study context. Team Member Exchange (TMX) and Turnover Intentions (TOI) were evaluated using Chung and Jeon's (2020) scales, where participants indicated their (dis)agreement on a five-point Likert scale. Additionally, Surface Acting (SAC) was assessed using a three-item scale by Brotheridge and Lee (2003), modified with the prefix 'while dealing with passengers' to capture relevant interactions. Furthermore, Employee Emotional Exhaustion (EEX) was measured using a nine-item subscale from the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach et al., 1997), with statements adjusted for the flight context, such as changing 'working with people all day is really a strain for me' to 'working with passengers during flight is really a strain for me.'

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

To validate the factor structure of the study variables, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's test were computed (KMO = 0.857, $\chi 2$ = 3157.776, df = 435, Sig. = 0.000) indicated suitable sample adequacy. Moreover, factor loading values exceeded 0.55 for all items, meeting acceptable standards (Hair et al., 1998). Further, reliability of the five scales was established through Cronbach's alpha (α), Reliability Coefficient (rho_a), and Composite Reliability (rho_c), producing values between 0.7 and 0.9 (Hair Jr et al., 2021). While α is conservative and rho_c can be liberal. So, rho_a values were reported which as well were between α and rho_c, indicating acceptable internal consistency (See Table 1).

The analysis confirmed convergent validity for LMX, SAC, TMX, and TOI with Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values above 0.5, except for EEX due to its five question items having factor loadings below 0.7 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Moreover, discriminant validity is established as the square root of AVE exceeded correlation values (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The Heterotrait-Momotrait Ratio (HTMT) ratio below 0.90 further confirmed construct distinctiveness (Henseler et al., 2015). Additionally, R^2 (ranging from 0.17 to 0.44) and Stone-Geisser's Q^2 values > 0 indicated strong explanatory power and predictive relevance (Hair Jr et al., 2021), while SRMR showed a reasonable model fit (Henseler et al., 2014). These results are summarized in Table 1.

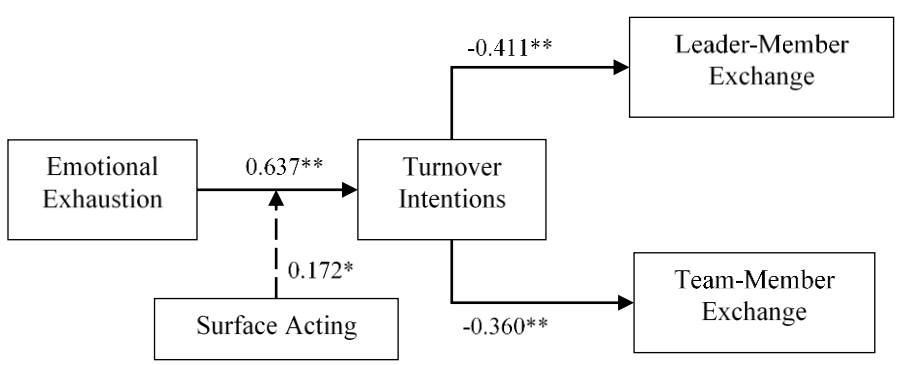
Table 1. Validity, Reliability and Model Summary

	Heterotrait-Momotrait Ratio					Fornell Larcker Criterion					α	rho_a	rho_c
	EEX	LMX	SAC	TMX	TOI	EEX	LMX	SAC	TMX	TOI			
EEX	0.595					***0.692***					0.863	0.874	0.892
LMX	0.234	0.100				-0.514	***0.732***				0.854	0.869	0.888
SAC	0.385	0.651	0.248			0.164	-0.007	***0.812***			0.768	1.067	0.852
TMX	0.715	0.455	0.105	0.385		-0.357	0.565	0.209	***0.796***		0.814	0.933	0.873
TOI	0.096	0.125	0.058	0.116	0.220	0.644	-0.411	0.084	-0.360	***0.859***	0.882	0.886	0.919
AVE						0.479	0.536	0.660	0.634	0.738			
R^2		0.169		0.130	0.441								
Q^2		0.195		0.102	0.408								
SRMR = 0.086 *(χ^2 = 945.80)*													

Emotional Exhaustion (EEX), Leader-Member Exchange (LMX), Surface Acting (SAC), Team-Member Exchange (TMX), Turnover Intentions (TOI), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), Coefficient of Determination (R^2), Predictive Relevance (Q^2), Standardized Root Mean Squared Residual (SRMR), Cronbach's Alpha (α), Reliability Coefficient (rho_a), Composite Reliability (rho_c).

Hypotheses Testing

As shown in Figure 2, the impact of flight attendants' EEX on their TOI was evaluated through hypothesis H1, and the results supported this premise (β = 0.637, t = 14.60, p < 0.001). Similarly, for H2 and H3, TOI significantly deteriorated flight attendants' social exchange relations with their peers (β = -0.360, t = 5.469, p < 0.001) and pursers (β = -0.411, t = 7.051, p < 0.001).



*Significant at 0.05, **Significant at 0.001, Italic (Not Significant), Dashed Arrow (Moderating Effect), Solid Arrow (Direct Effect)

Source: The Author

Figure 2: Path Summary

H4 examined the mediating role of TOI between flight attendants' EEX and their TMX, following the procedure recommended by Zhao et al. (2010). The results were significant for both the direct (β = -0.221, t = 1.776, $p < 0.05$) and indirect (β = -0.229, t = 4.59, $p < 0.001$) effects. A similar process was employed to test H5, yielding significant results for both direct (β = -0.448, t = 5.401, $p < 0.001$) and indirect (β = -0.262, t = 5.768, $p < 0.05$) effects. Thus, both mediations are complementary and partial.

Table 2. Hypotheses Testing

Direct Relationships	**β**	**Mean**	**SD**	**t-stat**	**Sig.**	**CI [5%, 95%]**
H_1: EEX → TOI	0.637	0.640	0.044	14.60	0.000	[0.558, 0.703]
H_2: TOI → TMX	-0.360	-0.373	0.066	5.469	0.000	[-0.456, -0.239]
H_3: TOI → LMX	-0.411	-0.425	0.058	7.051	0.000	[-0.493, -0.301]

Mediation Analysis

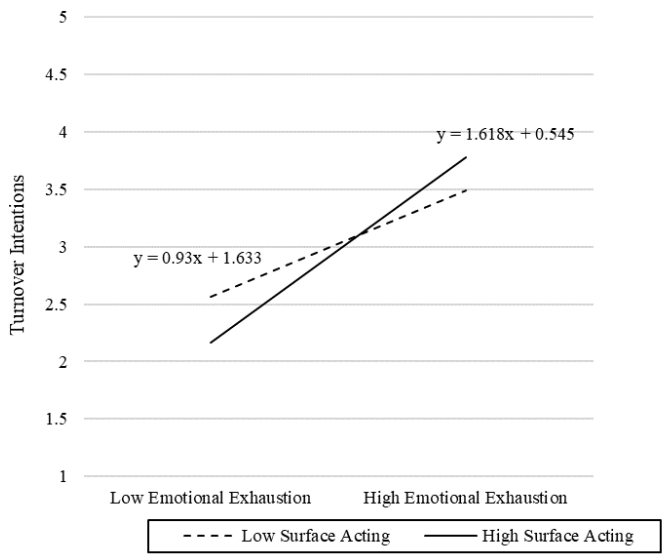
	Direct Effect			**Indirect Effect**				
	β	**t-stat**	**Sig.**	**β**	**SE**	**t-stat**	**Sig.**	**CI [5%, 95%]**
H_4: EEX → TOI → TMX	-0.221	1.776	0.003	-0.229	0.050	4.590	0.000	[-0.304, -0.144]
H_5: EEX → TOI → LMX	-0.448	5.401	0.000	-0.262	0.045	5.768	0.000	[-0.329, -0.181]

Moderation Effect
H_6: SAC x EEX → TOI

R^2 Without SAC	**R^2 With SAC**	**f-stat**	**β**	**SE**	**t-stat**	**Sig.**	**CI [5%, 95%]**
0.415	0.441	**0.046**	0.172	0.092	1.856	0.032	[0.033, 0.304]

Surface Acting (SAC), Emotional Exhaustion (EEX), Leader-Member Exchange (LMX), Team-Member Exchange (TMX), Standard Error (SE), Confidence Interval (CI), Effect Size (β), Standard Error (SE)

For H6, analysis revealed that SAC moderated the relationship between SAC and TOI (β = 0.172, t = 1.856, $p < 0.05$). Here, the moderation was significant, yet the effect size was small as shown by the f-square values (Cohen, 1988). Moreover, R2 value for the outcome variable improved following the inclusion of moderator. Slop analysis presented in Figure 3 further helps in understanding the nature of this moderating effects. The line is much steeper for high as compared to low levels of SAC. What is described above, is also summarized in Table 2.



Source: The Author

Figure 3: Slop Analysis

Discussion

The results offer several noteworthy insights into the relationships among study variables. The significant effect of EEX on TOI (64%) underscores that flight attendants experiencing higher levels of emotional exhaustion are more likely to have intentions to leave their job. This further reduces their contribution to TMX and LMX. This could be due to disengagement or decreased investment in workplace relationships as individuals contemplate leaving the organization, which is consistent with social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Here, the negative effect of TOI on LMX (41%) is greater as compared to its effect on TMX (36%). This might be because LMX relationships are often more hierarchical and formalized (Yoon & Bono, 2016), meaning that when an employee intends to leave, their disengagement is more pronounced and noticeable in interactions with their leaders. On the other hand, TOI's impact is slightly less pronounced on TMX. This could be due to the social support provided by peers (Tews et al., 2020), which might buffer the effects of turnover intentions. Employees might still maintain supportive and collaborative relationships with their team members, even if they plan to leave, to avoid conflict and maintain a positive work environment during their remaining tenure. Peer relationships among flight attendants may be characterized by shared experiences and mutual understanding of job challenges (Whitelegg, 2007), which can be resilient to the individual's intentions to leave. Thus, the camaraderie among team members can mitigate some of the negative effects.

Lastly, the significant moderating effect (17%) of SAC in amplifying the detrimental impact of EEX on TOI can be interpreted through the lens of the COR theory. When employees are emotionally exhausted, their ability to cope with job demands and maintain their well-being is compromised (Hakanen et al., 2018), making them more susceptible to negative outcomes such as turnover intentions. To make matters worse, surface acting, which requires additional emotional resources to manage expressions, further taxes these employees, especially when they are already emotionally depleted. This additional resource drain exacerbates the situation, thereby intensifying the likelihood of turnover intentions.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study offers a fresh perspective on the intricate dynamics between emotional exhaustion, turnover intentions, and workplace relationships among flight attendants. By identifying the early signs of disengagement through diminished contributions to LMX and TMX, the findings highlight a critical window for intervention. The study also underscores the heightened impact of surface acting in exacerbating emotional exhaustion, suggesting that airline managers need to focus on emotional resource management and supportive workplace practices to prevent turnover. Overall, this research not only enriches theoretical understanding but also offers practical insights for airlines to address the costly challenge of turnover through targeted employee support and initiative-taking management strategies.

Implication

First, flight attendants' LMX and TMX have been of interest in the airline industry (Chung & Jeon, 2020b). But, due to the nature of their work, the empirical examination of these constructs, especially concerning the impact of TOIs, has been lacking. Thus, the proposed model contributes to the broader understanding of the antecedents of diminished LMX and TMX among flight attendants, offering a foundation for subsequent research in this area. Moreover, this study pioneers the empirical investigation of these nuanced interactions, thereby enriching the assumptions pertaining to social exchange and conservation of resource theories.

Second, these findings also hold significant relevance for airline management. Airlines commonly portray flight attendants as youthful, attractive figures to enhance the appeal of cabin service (Ren, 2017), reinforcing a societal view that focuses on their role as service providers and sales representatives. Due to this perception, flight attendants' role in managing diverse services and emergency situations on board is often underestimated (Ford et al., 2013; Kodama et al., 2018). In this context, the loss of valuable skills associated with flight attendants' turnover incurs significant cost for airlines. These challenges necessitate the training programs to arm flight attendants with strategies to manage emotional demands. Study findings also imply that managers should recruit candidates with natural friendly disposition to mitigate the likelihood of employees resorting to surface acting, thus reducing its detrimental effects.

Another important implication of the study lies in its provision of the alert mechanism for crew managers about flight attendants' turnover intentions which are typically difficult to observe. However, the findings suggest that reduced participation in LMX and TMX by employees may indicate an increased likelihood of turnover. This foresight not only enhances organizational preparedness to mitigate high turnover among flight attendants but also contribute to its service performance.

Limitation and Future Recommendation

The study has certain limitations that suggest avenues for future research. Firstly, use of convenience sampling is biased towards female flight attendants which restricts its generalizability (Yagil & Medler-Liraz, 2017). The unique nature of flight attendant's job calls for caution while applying the results in other hospitality sectors. Here, structured data collection in collaboration with airline companies can improve sample randomization. Secondly, single-source measures such as the one used in this study may introduce common method bias (P. M. Podsakoff et al., 2003). This calls for diverse data collection in future. Thirdly, incorporating psychological safety (Vatankhah, 2021) and organizational citizenship behavior (Teguh Setiawan Wibowo, 2022) could enhance workplace exchange relations and broaden the study's scope. Lastly, future research could employ the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model by adding antecedents of emotional exhaustion to enhance predictive capability of the proposed framework (C.-F. Chen & Chen, 2012).

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